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Unification and Androgyny within Early Christian Portrayals of Christ

Seyla Collier

Religious Studies
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Mentor: Katherine Zubko

Abstract

Through aspects of divine androgyny, deities are able to connect with all people through leaning into a wider array of gendered resonances, such as encapsulating both a maternal and paternal role. Although divine androgyny is, in itself, a complex and controversial topic, androgynous depictions of Christ have existed since the earliest days of Christianity and continue to be produced. While there is ongoing debate on whether these images intended to embody divine androgyny, the artworks themselves speak to a tradition wherein typical markers of masculinity on their own do not form a complete image of the divine. Through deep analysis of multiple early Christian artworks, this thesis examines important motifs within the gender signifiers, pagan influences and wider imagery curated around Christ to examine how they work together to create a larger iconography of Christ as an androgynous divine figure. In identifying this iconography, this paper aims to investigate the multifaceted gendered aspects of Christ as a divine figure that have led to adaptability in how he has been depicted, allowing him to stay a poignant figure to a wider audience throughout the two millennia in which he has been actively worshipped.

Introduction

Divine androgyny is, in itself, a complex and controversial topic, yet androgynous depictions of Christ have existed since the earliest days of Christianity and continue to be created. While there is ongoing debate on whether the androgyny these images embody is intentional, the artworks themselves speak to a tradition where masculinity on its own does not form a complete image of the divine. Exploring the imagery and iconography utilized in these early Christian images of Christ allows for a better understanding of their significance and what they say about the cultures and periods from which they originate. Through examining multiple early Christian artworks, this thesis analyzes important motifs within the gender signifiers, pagan influences and imagery curated around Christ and how they form an iconography of Christ as an androgynous divine figure.

Context

Early Christianity existed within the context of the Roman world, and as such, understanding how gender was treated within the Roman context is vital to understanding gender within the world of early Christianity. In the ancient Mediterranean, there was a strong ideology that impelled women to stay indoors and in domestic spaces, lacking any social freedoms. However, evidence seen in both literature and legislation speaks to a widespread rise in women's social rights within the Roman world.[1] This rise in women's social rights coincided with the rise of Christianity, allowing women to be more active in the early Christian community.

Christianity rose to prominence throughout Rome as a mystery religion, not unlike the so-called cults of Dionysus and Isis in the same period.[2] These so-called mystery religions, Christianity included, were centered in the home, rather than on a state level like the Roman pantheon or Imperial cult, due to the illegalization of the practice. The presence of religion within the home in these house churches likely allowed early Christian women to become more active members of Christianity, some perhaps even holding authority within the religion, including roles of ministry and patronage.[3] While, as art historian Robin Jensen states: “there is no evidence for arguing that upper-class Christian women would have been likely specifically to have commissioned feminized Jesus images or have

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[1] Carolyn Osiek and David Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, (Westminster John Knox, 1997), 57-60.

[2] The word cult is problematic in the study of religion, as almost all religions fall under the basic definition of modern cults. However, the word itself has its origins in antiquity for a smaller religion, which is how the word is used in this paper.

[3] Carolyn Osiek & Margaret Y. Macdonald, *A woman’s place: house churches in earliest Christianity,* (Fortress Press, 2006), 9-12.

evolved a particular 'women's style' in contrast to the works commissioned by men," the fact that women were likely seen as more valued members of the community may have led to less strictly masculine imagery.[4]

It is thus impossible to ignore how the legalization and later widespread adaptation of Christianity affected Christian art, with women and individuals suddenly ousted by statesmen who pushed a more masculine concept of God, along with more vigorous rules for women within the church. If nothing else, the imagery of Christ as an everyman persevering, despite the Imperial cult's focus on powerful masculine figures, shows the influence and survival of early Christian ideals born within early house churches. The artworks this thesis is centered on are important in their uniqueness because, as large-scale artworks, they were made after this Romanization of Christianity, and thus stand as a form of resistance to the more widespread masculinization of the Church. The question then is, why was a more androgynous representation of Christ popular, and what did it mean to its original viewers?

Physical features of Christ: youthfulness, physiognomy, or intentional androgyny?

Within the early Christian catacombs, a common theme of iconographic differences between female and male figures emerges. Due to trends of the time, male figures were typically portrayed with short hair, muscular forms, and shaven faces, whereas women were portrayed with generally softer traits, protruding breasts, and longer hair. The frescos portraying scenes of a Christian woman's life from the catacomb of Priscilla (Fig. 1) present a strong example of this visual gendering. As the title suggests, this trio of scenes portrays the life of the female figure, who is present in each. Throughout the three scenes, she is identified by her medium-length hair and soft, downturned shoulders. The scene to the left shows her learning under a male teacher, whereas the scene to the right shows her in a more standard, feminine role of taking care of her child. The central scene expands on the scene to the left, showing her using her education and authority as a holy woman, praying as an orant.[5] Priscilla contrasts the figures surrounding her in the scene to the left; her teacher is gendered as masculine through his short hair and beard and her fellow student is identified as male through his shorter hair.

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[4] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art,* (Routledge, 2000), 126.

[5] Orant - A figural motif of a (typically) female figure praying, showing devotion. This motif was popular in Early Christian artwork and is one of the main forms of evidence alluding to a largely female audience.

Figure 1. Images of a Christian Woman's life from the Catacombs of Priscilla, 260s CE, fresco.

While there are many examples of Christ embodying gender identifiers of both masculine and feminine figures, that is not to say there are not examples of other long-haired masculine figures. Still, this motif seems to have a strong connection to the divine, as seen in representations of pagan deities or Emperors who considered themselves close to the divine. Additionally, Christ is not exclusively portrayed with more feminine traits, often varying in his iconography. What is of note is the fact that Christ *is* sometimes portrayed with the softer traits and longer hair that typically speak to femininity.

A possible explanation of these feminine traits is seen in the ancient theory of physiognomy, or the belief that one's physical traits speak to their nature as a person.[6] With physiognomy in mind, portraying Christ with traits typically identified as feminine—his long hair, beardless face, and soft shoulders being the most notable—may have been done to portray Christ with physical features associated with the personality traits early worshippers wanted to emphasize Christ as embodying. Furthermore, considering the rigid gender roles common within the ancient world, portraying Christ as more feminine may have spoken to his more traditionally maternal traits, such as his unconditional love for humanity.[7] Several scholars, dating back to early Christianity, argue that through transfiguration, Christ is able to embody both a more maternal, soft side as well as a more

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[6] Marke Ahonen, "Ancient Physiognomy," *Studies of the History of Philosophy of Mind* 12 (2014): 624. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6967-0_38

[7] Caroline V. Stitchle & Todd C. Penner, "Contextualizing Gender in the Greco-Roman World," in *Contextualizing Gender In Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla* (T&T Clark, 2009), 56-57.

imposing presence when called for.[8] This allows images of both a bearded, more masculine Christ to co-exist in the same churches as more feminine ones. An example of Christ changing appearance at his will appears in early Christian doctrine, an example of which is seen in *The Catechetical Lectures of St. Cyril*:

> Now the Saviour shews Himself under various forms to each, for his profit. For to those who stand in need of rejoicing, He becomes a Vine; to those who want to enter in, He is a Door; to those who need to offer prayers, He stands a mediating High-Priest. Again, to those who have sins, He becomes a Sheep, that He may be sacrificed for them; He becomes all things to all, remaining in His own nature what He is [sic].[9]

The fluidity in the body and nature of Christ spoken to in this passage could be interpreted as a sign of the fluidity of Christ as a deity; if the situation called for a female savior, Christ would be able to oblige and take on a female form.

One of the earliest surviving examples of a more feminine portrayal of Christ is the Raising of Lazarus fresco from the Catacomb of SS. Marcellino (Fig. 2), created in the 4th century. This piece provides some of the strongest evidence of the use of androgynous imagery of Christ in relation to the more female-dominant pre-Theodosian era of Christianity.[10] The scene shows Christ blessing the wrapped body of Lazarus. Here, Jesus wears a sorrowful face as he gestures his right hand towards the tomb, with his left holding up his long tunic. His androgyny is seen in his long pinned-back hair and soft face and shoulders, alongside his clean-shaven face. The fresco itself utilizes hierarchical proportions, with the figure of Lazarus only reaching Christ's hip.[11]

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[8] Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 127.

[9] Cyril of Jerusalem, "Lecture X" in *The Catechetical Lectures of St. Cyril*, trans. R.W Church. (John Henry Parker, 1838), 100.

[10] While the artwork in question is dated as being from the 4th century, the same century that Theodorius made Christianity the state religion of Rome, its location in the early Christian catacombs suggests this imagery was not influenced by Theodorius's ideas of Christianity.

[11] Considering the context of this piece, the commissioners needed to utilize imagery to both represent the biblical moment they wished to as well as remain somewhat within the Roman tradition in order to not raise suspicion and risk being crucified for their belief. The finer details of this fresco may be lost to time due to the deterioration of the plaster and dirt covering it. If nothing else, this artwork speaks to an androgynous portrayal of Christ in the earliest periods of Christian artwork.

Figure 2. Raising of Lazarus fresco from the Catacomb of SS. Marcellino, 4th century CE, fresco.

The fresco of Christ Between St. Peter and St. Paul in the Catacomb of SS. Marcellino (Fig. 3) provides a different type of contrast to the gendered motifs established earlier. While the Christ figure here does don a bearded face, he, unlike any of his contemporaries, wears his hair long. This is especially worth noting as it comes from the same period and location as the Raising of Lazarus fresco, suggesting the community buried here shared similar ideas towards Christ, contrasting the typical portrayal of a man.

Figure 3. Christ between Sts Peter and Paul from the Catacomb of SS. Marcellino, 4th century CE, fresco.

This portrayal especially contrasts with some of the ideals of early Christians. Most notably, Saint Paul spoke of very strict ideals of masculinity in Corinthians 11, of which depictions of Christ often contradict: "[d]oes not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?"[12] It is especially notable that there are multiple depictions of the apostles that match this ideal of masculinity, presented alongside depictions of Christ that contrast it. A strong representation of this dichotomy between the disciples and Christ is seen in the so-called Andrews Diptych (Fig. 4) from the 9th century. The ivory Diptych has six panels, each portraying one of the six miracles performed by Christ. Within the panels, Christ is portrayed with long hair and a clean-shaven face, contrasting the ideals of Paul. But perhaps, more notably, the apostles that accompany him are all presented with cropped hair, and many don facial hair, fitting into the ideals of masculinity set by Paul, while Christ himself does not.

[12] Corinthians 11:14-15 ESV

Figure 4. The Andrews Diptych, Victoria and Albert Museum, 9th century, ivory.

There is also the fact that many of these portrayals of a more androgynous Christ can be dismissed as showing a young Jesus rather than an intentionally androgynous one. While this contradicts Luke 3:23, where it is stated that Christ was in his 30s when he started to teach, it is possible that ideals of a youthful deity were prioritized by early Christian viewers over biblical accuracy. Yet even if the idealization of youth is the reason for this imagery, it is still strange that the disciples, who by most accounts were younger than Christ, are not given this same idealized youth.[13] The comparison of portrayals of Christ and the disciples then further calls into question the idea that these portrayals of Christ donned more feminine traits to represent his youth.

[13] Traditionally, “disciples" refers to younger students learning from an older teacher, which implies that Christ's disciples were younger than him.

Pagan influences on early Christian imagery

Another element of the imagery of an androgynous Christ figure comes from the fact that early Christians looked to Roman images of the divine because of the lack of iconographic imagery from the Jewish faith due to Mosaic law. This is seen in borrowed Roman motifs such as the good shepherd and deity enthroned. However, there remains the question of why early Christians chose the pagan iconography that they did, namely that of more androgynous deities. The main deities from which early Christians took iconographic influence are Apollo, Dionysus and Orpheus.[14] This decision should not go overlooked, as it does speak to what early Christians aimed to evoke through choosing these youthful, androgynous figures as models for their images of Christ.

The figure of Orpheus is extremely relevant in early Christian artwork. The idyllic portrayals of Christ tending to sheep in serene fields have more of an origin within pagan iconography than Christian or Jewish iconography in the form of Orpheus. Thus this iconography speaks to a preestablished image of a deity rather than a textual description, something common within this period of art.[15] The motif of the good shepherd is a prime example of this borrowed imagery contributing to the depiction of a more androgynous Christ figure.[16] This motif is seen in the Good Shepherd Mosaic from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy (Fig. 5). The mosaic is placed in one of the four main apses of the mausoleum, allowing for the scene to visually stand on its own while still being placed in a space full of imagery. The scene has a background of a clear light blue sky and lush golden grass, broken up by some rocks to add levels of elevation. Six sheep graze the plain surrounding the centrally seated Christ figure. The Christ figure is identifiable through multiple levels of iconography: he holds the cross over his left shoulder and bears a golden halo that speaks to his divinity. He dons long, slightly curled dark hair in contrast to his pale, soft, and clean-shaven face, which, alongside his gentle shoulders, speaks to a more androgynous figure. He sits fully dressed in a mixture of gold and purple—the Roman color symbolizing royalty. Christ is turned to his right, looking away from the sheep eating out of his left hand, which also denotes a casual gesture of blessing. Motif-wise, this scene presents a mix of the motifs of both the good shepherd and that of Christ enthroned, a motif based on images of seated kings and gods, commonly seen in Imperial cult images of the Roman emperors as well as depictions of Zeus/Jupiter.

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[14] Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 124.

[15] Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art,* 41.

[16] Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, "The Good Shepherd in Early Christianity," *Smarthistory*, July 29, 2020, https://smarthistory.org/the-good-shepherd-in-early-christianity/

Figure 5. Good Shepherd Mosaic from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy, 430 CE, mosaic.

While Orpheus has been a significant influence in shaping the iconography of Christ, it is Dionysus that Christ is most often compared to. The two deities have many similarities: both have wine as a major symbol, are born from a mortal mother, and, perhaps most crucially, both died as mortals, returned, and later ascended to godhood.[17] Thus, it makes sense that early Christians looked to imagery of this similar deity when depicting Christ. This connection is central to the androgyny of depictions of Christ, as Dionysus is a deity with a very complicated relationship with sex and gender. As a deity, Dionysus represents chaos within the ordered dualities of Greek and Roman society, disrupting the assumed absolutes of these opposites. The most relevant of these polarities Dionysus unifies are the dualities of the mortal and the divine and of male and female. Dionysus was likely intentionally portrayed as androgynous to allude to the mixing of the dualities of gender roles within Greco-Roman society that he represented. It may be that there was a similar discussion surrounding Christ's role within a binary society that led to the early Christians' choice to adopt so much imagery from Dionysus.

A large part of Dionysus's androgyny can be attributed to his audience. Evidence suggests that priesthood of a Greek god was limited to those who had the same gender as

[17] Albert Henrichs, "Loss of self, suffering and violence: the modern view of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, no. 88 (1984): 212-213, https://www.jstor.org/stable/311453

their deity; Dionysus contrasts this in his accumulation of large female and male audiences.[18] Albert Henrichs explains: "the realm of Dionysus comprised three separate provinces," two of which were separated by gender, fitting into the rigid gender roles of the time period, while the third was universal.[19] Contemporary understanding of Dionysian rituals concludes that only men were allowed to engage in the actual drinking of wine in Dionysusian rituals, as women being drunk was seen as improper.[20] While men embraced the madness of Dionysus within the home and society, women instead filled the roles of *maenads*—or mad women—and only practiced their ritual madness within the woods and wilds. Practitioners of Dionysus thus defied the social rules of ancient society by shifting the duality of male/outside and female/inside during worship. Despite the bifurcated gendered roles within the cult of Dionysus, Alberch states: "sexual differentiation was rigidly observed in these two areas of Dionysiac cult, it was ignored or abandoned whenever more universal qualities of Dionysus himself, or more general concerns of his human followers, were emphasized."[21] The third province of Dionysus is his idealized afterlife, which was available to all followers of Dionysus, regardless of gender. Rituals giving the everyday person power over their life after death were a common trend in mystery religions of the Roman period, as the idea that learning special knowledge to aid in the great unknown of death was extremely appealing to Roman citizens.[22] This relates to Dionysus's similarities with Christ, as both deities had female and male followers, but generally separated them into more specialized roles within their worship during this period. The separation of worship to deities depending on the gender of the worshipper is an entirely different conversation than the setting of Christ, who comes from Judaic Monotheism.[23] This additional context of gendered worship within the Greco-Roman world may provide another explanation for the more androgynous depictions of Christ, allowing for worship from both men and women.

While Orpheus and Dionysus are not the focus of this paper, understanding them and their shared elements with Christ is vital to interpreting early Christian artwork and the

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[18] Albert Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities," In *Jewish and Christian Self Definition: Volume 3. Self-Definition in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Ben F. Meyer and E. P. Sanders (SCM Press Ltd, 1982), 138-139.

[19] Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities," 139.

[20] Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities," 141-142.

[21] Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities," 139.

[22] Another example of involvement in a mystery religion aiding one's soul in achieving a better afterlife is seen in the Elysian mysteries.

[23] This is not to say there is no separation of genders in Judaic practice, rather that all genders worship the same deity. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women in Rabbinic Judaism: Focal Points and Turning Points," In *Judaism from Moses to Muhammad: An Interpretation*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Lezlie C. Green and Alan Avery-Peck (Brill, 2005), 303-334; Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship* (Liturgical Press, 1999) for additional information on gendered separation in Judaic practices for additional information on gendered separation in Judaic practices.

intentions behind it. Through utilizing the imagery of Orpheus and Dionysus, early Christians visually represented Christianity's similarities to a largely illiterate congregation. As such, the context of preestablished iconography and the ideals associated with it are vital to reading early Christian artwork in a holistic way, as this iconographic language was vital to communicating the ideals of Christ to the contemporary audience.

'Primal Androgyny'/Wholeness in Androgyny

The idea of androgyny within the Abrahamic divine is not exclusively visual, as many canonical Biblical texts can be interpreted as portraying the Hebrew God as a non-gendered, indescribable, higher being. While the idea is most popular within gnostic traditions, the idea of God as an androgynous figure—both the mother and father of mankind, one figure embodying everything—is inferred from Biblical interpreters. Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible has looked deeply into how some biblical passages can be interpreted to endorse this perspective. In looking at androgyny as a way for God to be imagined as a united figure representing the whole of humanity, she points to Deuteronomy 6:4, which describes God as "one, complete, whole, and thus above sexuality."[24]

Similarly, Trible also speaks to Hosea 11:1-11 and how God fulfills both the mother and fathers' roles in raising a child, gently teaching their children to walk and healing them when they fall.[25] God fulfilling a mother's role is far from exclusive to Hosea, and is also seen in how He nurtures, feeds and protects the Jewish people throughout the Hebrew Bible.[26] Another example of this is found in Isaiah 66:13, where God compares Himself to a mother in the way He seeks to comfort humanity. From a more modern perspective, these actions are simply seen as the actions of a parent of any kind, but notably, these are roles specifically assigned to women in ancient Jewish society. On a more biological aspect, God is also described as "who formed you from the womb," a role that lands solely within the responsibilities of a mother.[27] Gavin D'Costa speaks to the duality of roles the Hebrew god plays, stating that: "all genders find analogical affirmation in the life of God, while God's life itself is not gendered."[28]

While this evidence exists in Biblical sources, translations or interpretations that consider God as ungendered are considered to be modernly feminist. In many ways, this divine gender fluidity harkens back to the early Jewish, early Christian, and medieval

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[24] Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 1 (1973): 31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461386.

[25] Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 32.

[26] Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 32-33.

[27] Isaiah 44:24.

[28] Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: gender, culture and the divine,* (SCM Press, 2000), 74.

periods in which practitioners spoke frequently about the idea of an androgynous God and Christ. Early Jewish texts speak of God as incomprehensible, without the limits of a physical form, and whole in every way, needing no partner in the way Adam needs Eve to represent completeness.[29] A similar argument is brought up in early Christian texts that frame Christ as androgynous, such as Maximus the Confessor, who states that Christ is the "unified man, mystically abolishing by the Spirit the difference between male and female, and, in place of the two with particular passions, constituting one free with respect to nature."[30] Later on in the medieval period, the idea of a genderless Christ was intricately connected to his divinity through the hypothetical study of alchemy, that being between man and woman represents being between God and man, showing Christ's escape from the limitations of the Earth.[31]

Another argument supporting the concept of an androgynous Christ figure is through Adam. Spurred on by the implication of God being a whole figure, unseparated by sexual differences, is the conclusion that Adam—the first man, created from God's image—would have also been whole and thus free from the division of sexuality.[32] This theory is aided by the imagery of Eve—womanhood— being taken from Adam, as well as God pronouncing them Man and Woman at the same time, implying that Adam was something else before Eve was created in Genesis 2. Additionally, Adam's name being the same as the Hebrew word for mankind, 'adham,' adds to the interpretation of a nongendered first man, implying Adam originally represented all of humanity before the separation, when he was still whole like God.[33] The conversation of an androgynous Adam, similar to that around the androgyny of God and Christ, has been ongoing throughout history. A notable example of this debate from early Jewish philosophy comes from Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-40 CE), who sought to reunite the first and second stories of Genesis and the contradiction of Adam and Eve's creation order—if they were created together as described in Genesis 1, or separately in Genesis 2—through the idea that man and woman were created at the same time through Adam, who, created in God's image, was something in between our current understanding of male and female.[34] Leah DeVun argues that this 'primal androgyny' represents the

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[29] Aída Spencer, "Does God Have Gender," *Priscilla Papers* 24, no 2 (2010): 6. https://www.academia.edu/35347657/Does_God_Have_Gender.

[30] Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 48 (Migne, Patrologia graeca 90, 436A), quoted in Wayne A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13, no. 3 (1974): 165.

[31] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, (Columbia University Press, 2021), 165, https://doi.org/10.7312/devu19550.

[32] An understanding of divine wholeness shaped by inclusion of binary male and femaleness is shaped by assumptions (including Greek influences) about gender that are beyond the scope of this paper to attend to.

[33] Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 35.

[34] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, 20.

sinless innocence of humanity in Eden.[35] It can then be argued that Christ, being closer to God and free of the original sin that exiled humanity from Eden, would appear more like the original adham than the modern human.[36]

Androgyny in Baptism imagery

Baptism writings and imagery build on this idea of wholeness in androgyny, speaking to the unification of humanity and its many dualities, including the duality between men and women. Theologian Wayne Meeks identifies a common theme within the writings of Saint Paul which he titles the "Baptism unification formula," speaking to the dualities presented by Paul throughout the New Testament.[37] An example of this duality is seen in Galatians 3:28: "[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This unification under Christ and more specifically, through baptism, is reiterated in Corinthians 12:13, yet notably without the inclusion of male and female: "[f]or in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." Even with this omission, the idea of unification into one body under baptism still alludes to a humanity unified as one, free of differences—including gender—under Christ. This can be interpreted as further evidence of Christ himself being an androgynous figure, and thus whole.

The mosaic of the Baptism of Christ from the Arian Baptistry in Ravenna, Italy (Fig. 6), represents a more physical interpretation of these baptism ideations. Placed at the center of a larger mosaic dome and surrounded by images of sainted martyrs, the mosaic presents a scene of John the Baptist and the personification of the river Jordan standing around the very most central figure of Christ.[38] The roundel framing of this scene sits at the highest peak of the domed roof, holding significance as the centerpiece of the room at the highest elevation, thus showing Christ's importance through the positioning of the image alone. This importance is further emphasized by the gold utilized for the background of the mosaic, showing even those without context the reverence in which this figure is held. Both the personification of the river Jordan and John the Baptist wear beards alongside long flowing hair. The personification of the river Jordan fits into the motifs of the Roman god king, Jupiter, providing ancient viewers with a more recognizable figure of authority acknowledging Christ's divinity. The figure's posture and draped clothing which only covers

[35] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, 17.

[36] Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne," 185.

[37] Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne," 180.

[38] These figures are identified as sainted martyrs due to the palm leaves they hold, a Christian symbol of martyrdom.

the bottom half of his body, further support the god enthroned motif.[39] John the Baptist, on the other hand, stands atop a rock, leaning down towards the central figure of Christ and lightly touches the top of his head with a blessing gesture. Christ himself stands up to his waist in semi-translucent water, but is otherwise completely nude. He holds himself in a relaxed position, shoulders sloped and hands at his sides, patient as the baptism is performed. Above him a white dove—likely representing the Holy Spirit—pours water onto his head, aiding John in the process of baptizing Christ as well as showing God's willingness and acknowledgement of the baptism process. Yet it is the body of this Christ figure that makes this mosaic relevant to the topic of androgyny. While long hair is also seen on the more masculine figures of the scene, Christ's clean-shaven face, soft shoulders, and slightly protruding chest speak to a more feminine iconography. While his top half leans towards the more feminine, under the translucent water, a phallus is visible. Through this combination of both feminine and masculine sexual traits, Christ represents both sides of the supposed duality of humanity between man and woman and 'becoming one' during the baptism.

Figure 6. Baptism of Christ Mosaic from the Arian Baptistry in Ravenna, Italy, end of 5th century or beginning of 6th century CE, mosaic.

[39] The god in enthroned motif represents a more kingly yet untouchable divine, whereas more human portrayals emphasize Christ's connection to humanity.

While there is a clear connection between the wholeness of androgyny and the ritual of baptism, these types of artistic representations are few and far between. Far more often, representations of Christ show a more masculine form, such as the baptism Mosaic from Neonian Baptistry, also in Ravenna (Fig. 7). The two mosaics are extremely similar: both are golden, central scenes in domed roofs and contain the three central figures of Christ, John the Baptist and the River Jordan, as well as the Holy Spirit represented as a dove aiding John in the baptism. Additionally, the two mosaics are both framed by a procession of saints, presenting an extremely similar composition. The most striking difference between the two mosaics is the facial hair on Christ's face in the latter, but this is not to say the piece completely lacks androgyny. The Neonian mosaic portrays Christ with a protruding chest, soft shoulders, and long flowing hair, as does the mosaic from the Arian baptistry. Considering the dates and the nearby location, this piece likely inspired the mosaic in the Arian baptistry, thus explaining the many shared traits, as it precedes it by around 200 years.

These two mosaics show that androgyny in depictions of Christ was not purely linear, and instead was in flux with more masculinized images. Baptism imagery provides this androgyny in the particular context of a ritual of unification. The persistence of androgynous images of Christ both in and out of this baptism motif shows how ideas of androgyny in the divine did not simply fade out in favor of masculinized images, but existed in conversation with them.

Figure 7. Baptism of Christ Mosaic from the Neon Baptistery in Ravenna, Italy, end of 3rd century or start of 4th century CE, mosaic.

Conclusion

That these androgynous portrayals in artwork exist at all speaks to the fact that the idea of an androgynous Christ figure has existed since the early Christian period. The persistence of these images in cultures focused so strongly on the masculinization of power continues to show the power of an androgynous image of the divine, presenting a more multifaceted and adaptable deity, representing all things to all people. The many possible explanations for the presence of androgynous Christ figures range from the influence of pagan deities such as Dionysus, ideas of primal androgyny and how it extends to Christ, to the wholeness referenced in baptism liturgy being depicted literally. It remains all but impossible to claim absolute meaning from this imagery. Still, the creation of these images speaks to a more nuanced view of the divine and should continue to be discussed. While discussion of an androgynous Christ figure has become more and more prevalent, many resources remain inaccessible, preventing the general public from gaining a more general idea of primal androgyny and what it may signify. It is my hope that the discussion of early Christianity's androgynous portrayals of Christ will continue to be studied and incorporated into the wider public's knowledge.

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